
‘Fighting Mac’ McKenzie: WWI

A Devotion to Duty

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Abstract

William McKenzie was arguably one of the most diligent chaplains of the Australian Imperial Forces during World War One. Chaplaincy circumstances were different to those of modern times, yet some principles remain the same. This article explores features of McKenzie's personal qualities and professional behaviour that made his chaplaincy so influential, while also noting aspects that cut short his service. It seeks to apply principles that remain relevant today.

Key Words: ANZAC, Chaplain, Fighting Mac, Salvation Army

It may come as some surprise, even to those in the Chaplaincy Corps who understand the value of the work it does, that one of the most popular Anzacs of the Great War, according to the soldiers, was actually a chaplain. Despite the reputation of the diggers as being “*not religious*,” a contention made by a string of military historians, the fact is that one chaplain was feted by the soldiers, and by Australians at home, as perhaps the most famous of them all.¹ This man was William ‘Fighting Mac’ McKenzie, who served as the 4th Battalion chaplain from 1914 to late 1917, before being invalided home to a hero's reception in early 1918. What makes this stunning is that McKenzie publicly spoke against the bad language, the betting, the booze and the brothels that formed a staple of the stereotypical larrikin diggers' chief entertainments, and he forcefully appealed to them to turn their lives around. One would expect this behaviour to have consigned him to the ignominious category of ‘wowser’, almost the worst insult that could be bestowed on an Australian of the era. Instead, McKenzie overcame all his inherent and acquired disadvantages to be acclaimed, in the words of one soldier writing home, as “*the Daddy of the lot in the A.I.F.*,” winning “*undying popularity*” with the soldiers.² What was it about this extraordinary man that so transformed the soldiers' opinion? And can anything be learnt from it for today?

McKenzie volunteered for a chaplaincy position as soon as he heard of the declaration of war in August 1914 and was appointed to the 1st Brigade and attached to the 4th Battalion in mid-September. For the previous twenty-four years, he had served as a Salvation Army Officer in some of the toughest towns in Australia, learning by dint of experience how to connect with working-class men in particular. His great size and strength and dynamic personality added gravity to his efforts, especially in the face of opponents not afraid to use force against him. He met this with non-violent resistance without being in any way deterred from his mission. Using humour to disarm attacks, he captured the moral high ground and often left his opponents baffled, if not charmed.³



LTCOL William McKenzie, MC, OBE. a.k.a "Fighting Mac", was appointed a Military Chaplain in 1914 - WW1. McKenzie was one of the first chaplains ashore at Gallipoli. He is pictured here in 1918, in an autographed photo quoting the Salvation Army motto: "Yours in the blood & fire."

The formal establishment of Army chaplaincy was of very recent creation, its mechanisms only finalised in 1913, where the four main denominations (Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist) were given control over the appointment of chaplains from their faiths, to be distributed among the battalions on a proportion roughly equal to the 1911 census data on religious profession in Australia. McKenzie represented the category later formalised as Other Protestant Denominations (OPD), catering for small faith groups such as the Congregationalists, Churches of Christ, Baptists and The Salvation Army.⁴

The official duties of a chaplain were two in number: to lead the compulsory Church Parades on a Sunday and to conduct burials. Apart from that, there was no job description, no training and no adequate support system in place for the chaplains. There were, of course, many unofficial duties such as running voluntary services and religious activities, organising sports, sing songs, concerts, lectures, cinemas and other wholesome diversions, censoring mail and attending to the welfare of the men through running canteens, liaising with their families at home and supporting the social life of the battalion.

Most chaplains seized on such activities to leverage their effectiveness with the troops. Each had to make his own way in his allocated battalion, contending with the religious inclinations of the battalion commander and 2iC as well as with the opprobrium of many soldiers. It was an invidious position to be a Christian clergyman representing the Prince of Peace while his congregation was expected to kill. Religion was seen as “not only unmanly, but un-Australian,” especially in the “unrelieved masculinity” of the military, and the fact that the chaplain was an officer to boot merely added to the reasons why his position garnered little automatic respect. A religious non-combatant in the middle of a war was perceived as an anomaly, if not a downright hindrance.⁵

In such circumstances, McKenzie had to establish a relationship of trust with the battalion officers to facilitate his work, and with the soldiers to be effective. His ensuing popularity can be attributed to his personal and professional qualities that turned a potential failure into one of the most effective chaplaincies in Australian Army history. Some of these qualities were non-transferable, such as charisma, apparently limitless energy and inventiveness, and a phenomenal memory for faces and conversations, but most can be generalised across personality types and talents.

Perhaps foremost among the generic qualities was an optimistic spirit. *“Oh yes, to be cheerful, to be divinely cheerful, is an essential part of the duties of a Chaplain,”* wrote one British Great War chaplain, which McKenzie fulfilled, even when his own private emotions dipped at times.⁶ Suffering from the horrific conditions and dreadful casualties in France in 1917, his morale buckled for a while, at one point opining to his wife that *“I’m beginning to wonder if there really is a God after all who loves justice.”*⁷ Yet, writing for a Salvation Army audience at home he proclaimed that *“I rejoice in abundant health, a disposition for hard work, and a cheerful spirit to help keep my heart a-singing.”* When circumstances were dire, he lightened the mood with his characteristic playful alliteration. *“At present we are waging a woeful war in waders with slobbery, watering whirls wearily whisking round one’s waist in some of the trenches, and withering wintry winds whistling round your withers. Ugh! It is calculated to cool the combustible characteristics of the fiercest fire-eater, and make him sigh for a little bit o’ ‘eaven ‘ere, and ‘ome, sweet ‘ome, be it ever so ‘umble.”*⁸

He was unfailingly cheerful with the troops, and they appreciated him for it. In describing one of McKenzie's legendary impromptu concerts, a sergeant wrote *"he is the greatest card, I think, I have ever met."*⁹ Another noted that *"his cheery, bluff personality endeared him to everyone."*¹⁰ He made the chorus 'The Sunshine Song,' taken from an American hymn, into a popular concert and marching song. Its final line ran, *"I carry my sunshine with me where'er I go,"* and one soldier recorded how singing it on the march when in *"a kind of hopeless groove has done a whole lot to tide us on our hard and grumbling way."*¹¹ His concerts were huge successes, even when held just behind the front lines, with one described as *"a ding-dong, slap-up, red-hot, unadulterated Australian 'go,' with lots of ginger in it, and you can rest easy on the result. It went like a succession of gun batteries.... The place was gorged, and the enthusiasm at boiling point."*¹² Travelling by ship from Gallipoli to Alexandria in Egypt, with the passengers and crew terrified of German submarines, McKenzie's *"presence changed the whole atmosphere,"* and *"had the effect of stilling the tempest of fear"*.¹³

His unashamed spirituality was another vital feature of his chaplaincy. He not only preached with vigour but also demonstrably lived his beliefs, giving them added conviction in the eyes of the soldiers. Far from hiding his potentially unpopular faith out of fear of it giving offense, he was the most openly evangelistic of the chaplains, constantly running meetings to convert their often passive Christianity into an active, committed faith. These voluntary meetings were remarkably well patronised by the supposedly 'not religious' diggers, and he could have up to 1,500 men at his voluntary services, characterised by urgent appeals for changed lives. This urgency was propelled by the knowledge that some in his congregation *"will have been killed or wounded ere the next Sunday comes around."*¹⁴

His sermons could move hardened men to tears. A Scottish crewman on a ship remarked of one, *"Man, isn't it gran tae hear such strong fine manly sermons. I wad gang a lang way tae listen tae they sermons."*¹⁵ His service on the ship of terrified passengers to Alexandria was so deeply moving that *"they fell on their knees in rows, and the man who was both saint and soldier offered prayer."*¹⁶ He was complimented by battalion officers for other sermons, where the men listened with *"perfect attention and evidently like it,"* or *"drank in like new milk"* a homily on Samson with humorous touches to make his moral punch-lines easier to swallow.¹⁷

A deep personal integrity underpinned his actions, which made his religious convictions more admirable. He *"was not very welcome at first, for he was a padre and that cramped their style somewhat,"* being the butt of several demeaning practical jokes and even being 'counted out' at his first attempted sing song with the men. Early nicknames included 'The Bloody Parson,' 'God Almighty,' 'Salvation Joe,' and 'Holy Joe' before evolving into 'Old Mac' and 'Padre Mac' and at last the admiring 'Fighting Mac'.¹⁸ Yet McKenzie's passion for preaching a message of repentance and transformation combined with a deep respect for the beliefs of others, becoming noted for his gentleness with those who differed from him and his tactful manner of avoiding awkward situations. Despite his 'wowserish' personal convictions, soldiers did not feel condemned by his words or his actions. He attracted men of all religions and of none to his services and was regarded as *"an 'everybody's man' and not a mere Protestant,"* a remarkable tribute in an era of

entrenched sectarianism.¹⁹ Soldiers would put their cards, smokes and bottles away out of respect when they heard him coming along the trenches, singing in his powerful voice to give them a fair forewarning. When men pushed back against his strictures opposing swearing, he gleefully recounted their humorous responses, recognising that when one man said *"It's the bloody Salvation Army for me every time,"* the soldier was giving his most sacred pledge of loyalty.²⁰

The courage of his convictions was matched by physical courage as well. While all the chaplains in the Mena Camp near Cairo railed against the red light district of the Wazzir, McKenzie went further. His Salvationist tradition of direct confrontation of evil saw him enter the brothels at night and drag men out, asking them how their mothers, sisters and nation would feel about their behaviour, and sending them back to the camp. He fully expected to be stabbed by the brothel owners for ruining their business, but it did not deter his course of action.²¹ This physical courage would find further manifestation on the battlefields of Gallipoli and France.

Distinguishing between McKenzie's personal and professional qualities as a chaplain is somewhat arbitrary, given that his professional behaviour was merely an extension of his own personal convictions and values. This is what gave such a powerful edge to his professional conduct, for it emanated naturally from who he was. Perhaps the first of his professional qualities was his people-centredness, itself an extension of his deep passion for the souls of humanity. Having honed his natural charm on the streets of tough mining towns in civilian Australia through constant interaction with people in pubs and clubs and on the street, he now approached the diggers with warmth, humour and a disarming modesty, for while he loved a joke, it was even better if it was directed at him. His extraordinary memory meant that he never forgot a face or an encounter, being able to recall it effortlessly years later. This retentive memory also enabled him to converse intelligently on almost any subject, including on highly technical military topics. He mixed with equanimity from the highest generals to the lowliest privates.

Not only was McKenzie people centred, he was also service centred. He applied his enormous reserves of energy to meeting whatever need he saw without asking about whether it was for his battalion or not. He saw the entire AIF, as well as any other soldiers or civilians he encountered, as his parish. In Egypt he ran dynamic concerts so successful that the halls were packed and men pulled the matting off the walls to watch from the outside. No other chaplain was allowed to MC a concert if McKenzie was available, and he proudly told his wife Annie of a senior chaplain unable to control a rowdy audience. McKenzie watched in amusement, then jumped on stage, blew a whistle and had instant silence.²² He invented games that restored a playful quality to the men and often participated with childlike glee.

At Gallipoli, he often lent a hand to the water carriers struggling up the steep hills with cumbrous open-topped tins of water, or to stretcher bearers making their way down to the beach hospitals. Hearing a soldier wish for a chocolate or an egg, he tramped the length and breadth of the Gallipoli enclave until he had enough for each man in the battalion.²³ Noticing the negative impact on morale of not receiving mail, he asked James Hay, his Salvation Army superior in Australia, to start a *'write a letter to a lonely soldier'*

campaign, expecting it to generate a few hundred letters per mail. Instead, when it was circulated Australia-wide in the secular press, McKenzie was receiving 3,000 or more per mail from civilians all over Australia. While sorting and distributing these letters became a burden to McKenzie, the impact on the men was powerful. One soldier, replying to one of these letters, wrote of it being the first Australian mail since he had arrived in France four months earlier, *"a long time to go without receiving a letter from home."*²⁴

In France and Belgium, McKenzie was at the forefront of establishing not only free hot drinks stations for men entering and leaving the trenches but also canteens just behind the lines and well within German artillery range. Soldiers were delegated to help run these, but McKenzie usually bought the supplies himself. He used the profits to purchase specials for the men such as waterproof matches or edible delicacies. An example of one hectic day illustrates his relentless schedule. After less than four hours' sleep, he cycled twelve kilometres each way to conduct a burial. After lunch and an interview, he went shopping in Poperinghe for goods for the canteen, returning at 7.30 pm for a late tea, then at 9 pm by horse for the twelve kilometres for more funerals. Finding insufficient graves dug, he had to rouse out ten men at midnight. After the ride back, he then walked three kilometres to the new camp and retired at about 4.30 but was so exhausted that he only fell asleep at 6. The next day he was back in Poperinghe for more supplies.²⁵ The men appreciated these canteens selling hot food and drinks as they came out of the line and McKenzie overheard soldiers say *"let us patronise old Mac's canteen."*²⁶ Several senior Australian officers overtly linked improved morale to access to canteens, especially when the men were *"under severe strain."*²⁷

Another quality added a particular edge to McKenzie's influence as a chaplain: hard work. Chaplains in the First AIF were not required to participate in training exercises, yet the most effective ones chose to do so. With a huge physique hardened by farm work in his teenage years, McKenzie revelled in the physicality of training, out-performing fit young men half his age. He carried the packs of soldiers too exhausted on tough route marches across desert sand and dug trenches alongside them. *"Don't they think I'm a tartar for work,"* he told his wife. *"This gives me a great hold on the boys.... You can hardly imagine how popular I am with the men and this helps me so much."*²⁸ A snobbish soldier agreed despite himself, for he did not like McKenzie's *"rough, ill-educated"* manner but noted that his going on route marches and organising *"grand concerts"* meant that *"he is the man for the boys all right."*²⁹

On Gallipoli, he put in 18-hour days that often began at the beach hospitals and worked their way up the shell-torn and sniper infested Monash Valley and into the trenches along the ridge lines. At night, he performed funerals under the relative safety of darkness, returning to his dugout in the early hours of the morning. Finding one night free of funerals, he cut steps into a steep and slippery part of a track that had been troublesome to stretcher bearers and water carriers when he could legitimately have caught up on lost sleep. The soldiers badged it 'Old Mac's Steps' in his honour. During and after the Battle of Lone Pine in August 1915, he worked himself to a frazzle sorting the living from the dead and conducting 450 funerals, helping to dig many of the graves.

These activities represented not just hard work but also an embedded presence. Where many chaplains skipped training exercises for religious tourism in Cairo, earning from the men the derogatory nickname of ‘Cook’s Tourists’ after the famous travel agency, McKenzie spent as much time with the troops as he could. His presence in the routines of army life, including its toughest moments, earned him enormous respect and trust. At Gallipoli, where chaplains were scarce, McKenzie, although suffering from dysentery, refused to leave until ordered to spend a month recovering in Egypt. There he nevertheless maintained a punishing schedule of hospital visitations when he should have been convalescing. After Lone Pine, he was so physically and emotionally exhausted that he was hauling himself around with the aid of a stick, half crippled by neuritis, yet he stayed with his men. In France, he continued to stay close to his battalion, moving with them into the trenches and being active in no-man’s-land during the Battles of Pozières, Mouquet Farm and Broodseinde Ridge, recovering the wounded and burying the dead under shell fire.

Such presence required remarkable courage, although McKenzie was among the few who tended not to feel fear, instead recording “a most gleeful happy mood” or of being “strangely elated” when under fire.³⁰ Other chaplains, not so naturally gifted in lacking fear in the face of danger, also demonstrated courage, and in every case, such actions won the deep respect of the men they served. Men observing McKenzie wrote of the impact he had on them. One officer, overwhelmed during the intense fighting at Lone Pine, sought escape in a communication trench. One glance from McKenzie, who was treating the wounded there, sent the man back to the fray.³¹ A soldier later recounted with wide-eyed admiration McKenzie’s heroics at Lone Pine, concluding “He was a man!”³² His inspiring presence led to the development of myths of him leading soldiers in counter-attacks at Gallipoli, tales that McKenzie dismissed as fantasies.³³

McKenzie also bridged the gap between the servicemen and women and the civilians at home. He was a prolific letter writer, often churning out forty or more daily, often after everyone else was asleep. Naturally he wrote to the families of those in his battalion who were killed and wounded, replying to the letters he received back as well. However, he also wrote to many other families of men not in his unit. For example, after Lone Pine, he wrote to Willie Dunstan’s parents assuring them that their son’s serious wounds would not be fatal. Dunstan belonged to a different brigade than McKenzie’s and he had only met the lad in passing, yet still took the trouble to write at a time when he was overwhelmed with funerals and letters on behalf the hundreds of men he had buried.³⁴ His letters home were widely reprinted in the press, creating a further link between his work and an anxious civilian public in Australia eager for reliable news from the front.

In many ways, McKenzie’s role was to “bring humanity to an inhuman situation,” restoring individuality to those serving in an institution prone to dehumanisation by reducing service personnel to mere numbers and functions.³⁵ The army even valued chaplains principally through their ability to make men more effective instruments of war. However, McKenzie went beyond the mere fulfilment of his formal service obligations to the affirmation of humanity in each person and the building of community among the men. His days spent in chats with individuals and in small groups were crucial to this end, as were his more public concerts, games, sing songs and services.

There was one area where McKenzie was not a model for other chaplains. His commitment to his mission was so absolute that he neglected self-care in the pursuit of a devotion to duty and service to the greater good. It led to his physical and mental degradation, spending much of 1917 in a cycle of hospitalisation followed by hasty returns to duty before he had really recovered with predictable relapses of fevers and memory loss requiring further treatment. He wrote of conducting ten services requiring considerable walking and cycling between venues on a single Sunday, which was *"evidently was a bit too much for my nervous reserves, as I was trembling like a leaf at 8 pm,"* leaving him with high fever, recurrent nightmares and constant retching.³⁶ A month later he admitted that *"I am absolutely war weary, my memory is fast failing and I'll have hard work to avoid a collapse later on."*³⁷ It led to him being returned to Australia in early 1918, too exhausted to continue. A chaplain of comparable stature with the troops was Walter Dexter, who lasted the entire war by understanding how to take breaks without in any way compromising the extraordinary service he gave to the men.³⁸

McKenzie's impact was profound, remaining a celebrity in Australia for the rest of his life. A memoirist wrote that he *"rendered consistent and consecrated service of every kind, physical, social, mental and spiritual... in everything he was a tower of strength to the officers and a comfort and keep to the men of his brigade. He never spared himself in any way."*³⁹ Another, when writing of one of McKenzie's impromptu front line sacred sing songs, breathlessly proclaimed *"he is a grand fellow, the best of the boys will tell you in the A.I.F. he is almost idolised by the Australians you have no idea how that man is liked, I'll bet he can sway the whole of the Australians any way he chooses, and he would give you half of his last penny."*⁴⁰ His colonel said to him, *"I cannot find words to express my appreciation for all you are doing among the men."*⁴¹ One observer later wrote, *"in public he is modest and unassuming above most men I have met. He has humility without servility; he is firm without being hard; genial in disposition; incorruptible in character, transparently honest and sincere; he is of that type which commands not only full confidence but profound esteem."*⁴² While many other Great War chaplains exhibited these fine characteristics and thus won the respect and love of those they served, McKenzie was the epitome of influential chaplaincy.⁴³

Times and circumstances have changed, and the role of the chaplain has become more specialised and better trained. Many of the tasks that McKenzie undertook are now performed by other specialists.⁴⁴ Yet in McKenzie's attitude and actions are found the principles behind good chaplaincy which can be adapted to any era. Spirituality, personal integrity, and cheerfulness, a commitment to hard work and an embeddedness among those they serve; and a deep care for the soldiers' individual and collective physical, emotional and spiritual welfare remain the hallmarks of the effective military chaplain. His legacy remains as an inspiration for contemporary Army chaplains.

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